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The New Indian Express
Wishes its readers
Happy Holi

AT LEAST 137 ABDUCTED SCHOOL CHILDREN FREED IN NIGERIA

They were abducted over two weeks ago from their school in Nigeria's northwestern state of Kaduna by a band of motorcycle-riding gunmen

ABDUCTIONS PUT PRESSURE ON PRESIDENT

The Nigerian Army claimed the children were freed during a rescue operation on Saturday. President Bola Tinubu, under pressure to end abductions which has become common in the conflict-hit northern region of the country, had vowed to rescue them without paying ransom. Sources said the abductors were hiding in the region's vast and ungoverned forests

OVER 280 STUDENTS WERE TAKEN: TEACHERS

- It is not clear how many students were kidnapped. Teachers have said over 280 pupils between the ages of eight and 15 were taken. The government had initially said all of them had been freed
- Bandit gangs routinely attack communities and carry out mass kidnappings for ransom in northwest and north-central Nigeria | P9

1,400

STUDENTS HAVE BEEN KIDNAPPED FROM NIGERIAN SCHOOLS SINCE 2014

CHENNAI • MADURAI • VIJAYAWADA • BENGALURU • KOCHI • HYDERABAD • VISAKHAPATNAM • COIMBATORE • KOZHIKODE • THIRUVANANTHAPURAM • BELAGAVI • BHUBANESWAR • SHIVAMOGGA • MANGALURU • TIRUPATI • TIRUCHY • TIRUNELVELI • SAMBALPUR • HUBBALLI • DHARMAPURI • KOTTAYAM • KANNUR • VILLUPURAM • KOLLAM • TADEPALLIGUDEM • NAGAPATTINAM • THRISSUR • KALABURAGI

I.N.D.I.A bloc to hold mega rally over Kejriwal's arrest

Oppn parties' joint protest on March 31 in Delhi's Ramlila Maidan

PREETHA NAIR @ New Delhi

UPPING the ante against the arrest of Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, the Opposition INDIA bloc said on Sunday that it will hold a mega rally at Delhi's Ramlila Maidan on March 31 to protest against the BJP government's alleged targeting of political rivals using federal agencies.

Announcing the decision at a joint press conference in Delhi, Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) leader and Delhi minister Gopal Rai said all INDIA-bloc parties will hold the rally to safeguard the country's interests and democracy. Top leaders of several opposition parties including the Congress, TMC, CPI(M), Shiv Sena (UBT), and Samajwadi Party are expected to attend the rally.

> Democracy and the country are in danger. All INDIA bloc parties will take part in this 'maha rally' to safeguard the country's interests and democracy
>
> AAP leader Gopal Rai

"The Prime Minister has been acting like a dictator and suppressing democracy to arrest Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal. Whether it is Hemant Soren in Jharkhand or Tejashwi Yadav in Bihar or the CM of West Bengal, all are being slapped with fraudulent cases to silence them ahead of the Lok Sabha polls," said Rai. He alleged AAP leaders are being prevented from holding protests and Kejriwal's family has been placed under house arrest. "Our party office was sealed despite the Model Code of Conduct being in place. Now the Congress's accounts have been frozen, so they won't be able to run a campaign for the polls," Rai added.

Hitting out at the BJP, Delhi Congress leader Arvinder Singh Lovely exhorted the public to join the proposed rally.

The Opposition leaders also alleged Kejriwal was arrested after the State Bank of India was forced to reveal the donations the BJP received through electoral bonds. One of the approvers in the Delhi liquor policy case got bail after sending money to the BJP, they alleged.

"There's no level-playing field for the opposition parties anymore. Our leader Rahul Gandhi has been trying to save the democracy and we will stand by the AAP to save the CM," said Lovely adding that they are hopeful that the authorities would allow them to hold the rally.

CPI(M) leader Rajiv Kunwar said the fight is against the dictatorial rule of the Modi government.

Rallying behind Kejriwal, several leaders including Congress, TMC, and CPI(M) of the INDIA bloc had met the Election Commission on Friday and submitted a memorandum on the instances of central agencies targeting them.

Delhi CM issues 1st order from custody: AAP

ANUP VERMA @ New Delhi

THE Aam Admi Party (AAP) on Sunday said Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal issued his first order from Enforcement Directorate (ED) custody, instructing Delhi water minister Atishi Marlena to solve water and sewer problems in some areas of Delhi.

"I might be in jail, but people of Delhi shouldn't be inconvenienced," he wrote in the order as per Atishi. However, the issuing of the order has raised legal questions.

The ED has taken cognisance of Atishi's statement. The ED will probe if the directions were in line with the special Prevention of Money Laundering Act court's order issued to the ED.

Another question raised by Kejriwal's order is whether he can continue as CM now that he is in custody. Former Additional Solicitor General KC Kaushik said there is no bar on him continuing as CM for now as he has not been convicted yet.

Kangana Ranaut, Naveen Jindal in BJP's 5th list

RAJESH KUMAR THAKUR @ New Delhi

AFTER a week-long discussion, the Bharatiya Janata Party on Sunday evening released its fifth list of candidates for 111 Lok Sabha seats in 17 states, including Bihar, West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh. The BJP retained a majority of its sitting MPs, but at the same time gave seats to newly inducted members for high-profile seats.

Kerala BJP chief K Surendran will take on Congress sitting MP Rahul Gandhi and CPI's Annie Raja in Wayanad.

Sandeshkhali's Rekha Patra, who raised her voice against suspended Trinamool muscle man Sheikh Shahjahan, will contest from Basirhat in West Bengal.

Kangana Ranaut will contest from the Mandi seat in Himachal Pradesh

Former Calcutta HC judge Abhijit Gangopadhyay, who gave several strong verdicts against the TMC government, will contest from Bengal's Tamluk constituency. He had joined the BJP recently after resigning as HC judge.

Industrialist and former Congress MP Naveen Jindal on Sunday joined BJP and was immediately named the party's candidate for Kurukshetra seat in Haryana. He had represented the seat between 2004 and 14.

As was reported first by this newspaper, Pilibhit sitting MP Varun Gandhi was dropped and Uttar Pradesh minister Jitin Prasada was fielded from the seat. Varun's mother and Sultanpur sitting MP Maneka Gandhi will contest from the same seat again.

Ex-IAF chief joins BJP

Former Air Chief Marshal RKS Bhadauria joined the BJP on Sunday just ahead of the Lok Sabha elections. He was with the IAF for 41 years. He called on party president JP Nadda at his residence.

Sita Soren, who joined recently from the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, was named for the Dumka LS seat. In Andhra Pradesh, state BJP chief D Purandareshwari was fielded from the Rajahmundry LS seat, while Varaparasad Rao, who joined the party on Sunday, was fielded from Tirupati.

Former law minister Ravi Shankar Prasad was fielded from Patna Sahib in Bihar, while Union minister RK Singh was repeated from Arrah.

Actor Arun Govil, who played Lord Rama in Ramayana, will fight from UP's Meerut.

Union ministers Ashwini Kumar Choubey, VK Singh, and ex-Union minister Anant Kumar Hegde have not been given tickets this time.

LOK SABHA POLLS

Kageri, Shettar among 4 in BJP second state list

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @ Bengaluru

THE BJP on Sunday announced its second list of candidates for Lok Sabha elections in Karnataka.

Former Assembly Speaker Vishveshwara Hegde Kageri will contest from Uttara Kannada constituency instead of sitting MP Ananth Kumar Hegde. The party will field former chief minister Jagadish Shettar from Belagavi constituency. It has chosen former minister Dr Sudhakar for Chikkaballapura constituency and Raja Amareshwar Naik for Raichur.

With this, the saffron party has announced its candidates for 24 seats in the state. The party is yet to finalise its candidate for Chitradurga constituency.

The names of former minister Govind Karjol and Union Minister of State for Social Justice and Empowerment A Narayana Swamy are doing the rounds for this constituency. However, local BJP workers are against them. This is the reason for the delay in finalising a candidate for Chitradurga constituency, according to sources in the party.

IIT-Guwahati student aspiring to join Islamic State arrested

ONE MORE SUSPECT

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said there is one more radicalised student in the IIT, Guwahati. "Not one but there are two students. We got one and hopefully, we will get the other soon," the chief minister said

PRASANTA MAZUMDAR @ Guwahati

A student of the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Guwahati, who had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State and had gone missing, was detained by the police on Saturday as he was reportedly on his way to join the terrorist group.

The fourth-year student, hailing from Okhla in Delhi, was nabbed by the Assam Police from Hajo, about 30 km from Guwahati.

"Reference @IITGuwahati student pledging allegiance to ISIS—the said student has been detained while travelling and further lawful follow up would take place," Director General of Police GP Singh wrote on X.

Before disappearing from the IIT campus, the student had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State through his social media posts. In an email sent to the police, he said he has plans to join the terror group.

"We immediately contacted the IIT-Guwahati authorities but they said the student was missing since noon. His mobile phone was also switched off," additional superintendent of police Kalyan Kumar Pathak who is a part of Assam Police's Special Task Force, said.

A black flag, resembling that of the Islamic State, was recovered from the student's hostel room and sent for verification. Pathak said the police were trying to find the motive behind sending the email.

The incident comes days after the Special Task Force nabbed ISIS India head Haris Farooqi and his associate soon after the duo had crossed over into Assam's Dhubri district from Bangladesh.

K'taka's claim of fund denial utterly baseless, says Nirmala

KARTHIK KK @ Mysuru

UNION Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Sunday dismissed the state government's claim that Karnataka is not getting its due share of funds from the Centre.

Participating in an interaction programme organised here by the Thinkers' Forum, she termed the claim "utterly baseless" and clarified that the Centre has been releasing Karnataka's share of funds as and when required.

All funds payable to Karnataka have been released. But if the due process of an audited certificate has not been received by the Centre, then it cannot release funds.

Sitharaman said if the amount claimed by the state government is not part of the final recommendations of the Finance Commission, the Centre cannot release it. She stressed the need to differentiate between genuine financial allocations and misinterpretations aimed at confusing the people.

Sitharaman said that she will send a Kannada version of the Finance Commission's recommendations to the state government to clear its doubts.

She said Karnataka's economy was doing well till a few months ago. The state government is now accusing Prime Minister Narendra Modi of not giving money to run its welfare schemes. CONTINUED ON: P4

TITAN-IC VICTORY

Gujarat Titans skipper Shubman Gill (centre) kicked off his IPL captaincy chapter with a six-run victory against Mumbai Indians on Sunday | SPORTZPICS | P11

EXPRESS READ

SSLC exam in 2,750 centres across state from today

Bengaluru: SSLC examination will be held in 2,750 centres across the state from Monday, with 8,69,968 students, including 4,28,058 girls, appearing for it. The examination will be held from 10.15 am to 1.30 pm till April 6. Prohibitory orders will be in force around the centres. BMTC and KSRTC will provide free rides for SSLC students | P2

Include Mekedatu in manifestos, Gowda tells Karnataka parties

Bengaluru: Former PM and JDS supremo HD Deve Gowda on Sunday urged all political parties in the state to include the Mekedatu drinking water project in their poll manifestos. "Let BJP, Congress and JDS announce in their manifestos, and we all will work together for the project," he said | P5

It's a nightmare in Istanbul for 50 flyers

S LALITHA @ Bengaluru

NEARLY 50 flyers headed to India during the Easter break in London via Turkey had a harrowing experience after their IndiGo flight to Mumbai got delayed by 15 hours on March 22.

The initial six hours till 2.30am at the Istanbul International Airport were a nightmare for them with many squatting on the floor for want of seats where they were asked to wait. They were not even given food or information on the flight departure.

Their passports were taken away and returned after bitter arguments with airport officials. They reached their destinations in India from Mumbai on Saturday.

While Turkish Airlines flew most of the flyers from London to Istanbul, IndiGo was to take them from there to Mumbai after a one-hour layover there. However, the IndiGo flight (6E 0018), which was to take off at 8 pm on March 22, was rescheduled to 3.30am the following day and then to 8am. Finally, it took off at 11am.

Passengers wait for IndiGo flight at Istanbul International Airport | SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

One of the flyers, Rohit Sharma from Mangaluru and an MBA student from University of East London, told *TNIE*, "With the ticket fare for direct flight from the UK to Karnataka touching Rs 1 lakh, I opted to come via Turkey and Mumbai, which cost me only Rs 44,000. But it was a nightmarish experience at the Istanbul airport. We were taken to the travel desk at one corner of the airport where there were only five chairs. When a request was made for more chairs, the response from airport staff was rude. There was no support or information from the airline. Only after new boarding passes were issued after taking our passports, we got to know that our flight would be at 8am the next day." "I finally reached home at 12.05am on March 23 instead of the same time a day earlier," he said. CONTINUED ON: P5

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